



## MEMSAHIB'S INDIA: MEMSAHIB'S RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIAN FOOD AND SERVANT

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### ABSTRACT

This article mainly focuses on the life and food habits of the memshahibs in India. It also tells about the innovation of recipes and dishes of the European ladies who came to India during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The relationship between the memsahib and her servants is discussed here. The article depicts how the memsahibs dealt with their Indian servants in spite of so many barriers like communication problem, availability and scarcity of ingredients and supplies and the cook's inefficiency towards what was instructed by the memsahib. It further tells about the memsahib's problems and traumas, her socio-psychological shock after her arrival to this unknown land where nothing was according to 'their' land. Some of them created a bond with the natives of this land and others remained aloof complaining about the weather and food, all these are mentioned here. There are list of some fruits, vegetables and other consuming articles and names of memsahib's invented recipes. The article talks about the fears of the memsahibs regarding their cooks- their cleanliness and their habit of stealing. Apart from this the memsahibs liked about Indian food and what they learnt from here before returning to England has been penned down here.

**KEYWORDS:** Memsahib, Cooking, Recipe, Servant, Cook, Food, Climate, Dish.

### INTRODUCTION

The very term 'memsahib' brings up to our minds of some rich, wealthy, fancy, aristocratic women who came from Europe. Yet, we do not know about the uncertainties and difficulties that they faced when they stepped into colonial India. The life of the Memsahibs in India is one of the principal parts of Colonial rule. Here Memsahib's India means all about the notion of European women, their arrival in India and how they dealt with their everyday life in the Kitchen, with their servants. The word 'Memsahib' is a combination of two words, '*mem* or *ma'am*' and '*sahib*' which means '*sir*'. This word becomes popular during the British Raj in India to refer to the females of the white race. This term was popular among the natives of India. We do not get to know much about the lives of the memsahibs in Bengal during the Company Raj because most of the officers and company employees used to travel for their work keeping their children and wives at England. A reminiscence of the past will prove that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the East India Company did not permit any British lady to India. So the social life of the British in India was almost without memsahibs. It was that the charters of the Company that forbade women at posts but as the employees ignored the instructions and often took Indian mistresses, to save their men; the company was bound to send groups of young women from England to India. There were not only young unmarried women but also European wives and the 'other' women.<sup>1</sup> We get references from Margaret Macmillan's writings that the journeys were so long that the fresh meat, rations, tea started to get shorter and rot and meat was too salty and had too much garlic in it.<sup>2</sup> When Siraj-ud-daulah attacked Calcutta there were only 80 memsahibs in Bengal. In 1810 AD they were numbered as 250.<sup>3</sup> By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century mostly from 1860s, the arrival of memsahibs in India increased. Yet there were many who wanted to avoid the travels, but after the opening of Suez Canal (1869) which made travelling to India from Britain much easier the situation changed. Thus the fear of long journey was somewhat removed from the minds of the memsahibs. There are instances where we see that many memsahibs were reluctant to come to India, afraid of its weather and land. For them arrival to

an unknown land was way too risky and difficult. We can cite the example of Sir John Shore and his British wife who did not wanted to come to India, for its sultry weather and long distance.<sup>4</sup> Only a few of the high ranking colonial officials and army officers and their wives had come to India. Apart from these reasons there was also the economic condition of Britain that has to be mentioned. Ireland faced a great famine; there was crisis of cloth, food and many other basic necessities so a large group of them wanted to come to India which was an El Dorado (golden land) for them. As time proceeded we find that when the officials acquired wealth and power, there started to arrive the memsahibs. The memsahibs sometimes didn't want to leave their native land, as it was the place where they had their settlements. Those who came here with their husband had a tough time here. The European women upon arriving in India on ships often came here with the previous instructions given to them about India. Naturally they had a fear within them about the so called "uncivilized" land. They used to read guidebooks on all aspects of lifestyle, health in this tropical climate.<sup>5</sup> When they travelled to India they carried with them the fear of the unknown land. Many didn't want to come to India due to the fear of diseases and heat but others who came had to deal a lot. One such example was, the arrival of Florence Marryat, who was the wife of a British Officer asked the steward for some food but she was denied according to army regulations and she passed the night without food.<sup>6</sup> Soon after they landed they were deported to the Dak Bungalows where there was hardly any proper accommodation or food.<sup>7</sup> Only some Memsahibs had the opportunity to stay at Royal Palaces.

The dak Bungalow was a government building in British India under East India Company's rule and British Raj. The Dak Bungalows were often located in such areas where food supplies were sparse. The Memsahibs had to depend on the dak bungalow's khansama who went to the bazaars and cooked food not up to the standard of the memsahib's taste. There was a popular joke that khansamas would always ask the guests about what they wanted to eat but whatever the request was the dish

was obviously none other than chicken with gravy which was not so delicious to taste.<sup>8</sup> Women had to cope with this situation, there were awful meals, sometimes cooked by the memsahibs herself and in most cases they were inexperienced. Huge bills for supplies appeared, run up by servants. Unfortunately, the memsahibs struggled with the rudiments of cooking and housekeeping in India and thus they had to keep a huge number of servants to take care of their need. Chaotic situations occurred where memsahibs ordered their servants to perform a task and they could not do it properly. Even though the servants were unable to cater to the orders of the memsahibs they thought that the fair skinned people were their everything, their father, mother and God and they always wanted to be summoned, by greeting and abiding by the orders of the memsahibs, as said by Fanny Parkes (1850).<sup>9</sup> In another instance Emily Eden wrote that she was amazed by the number of servants attached to her.<sup>10</sup> This huge number of servants had created one problem, that was the memsahib practically had nothing to do. For household chores, taking care of children, gardening, petting the dogs and many other works were looked into by the Indian servants.<sup>11</sup> According to *Indian Outfits and establishments*, the native ways of cooking were extremely nasty.<sup>12</sup> They were horrified with the stories of the Indian servants of socks used for staining tea or coffee or soup and preparing food without maintaining proper cleanliness. There are stories that the memsahib often instructed the cook on boiling and filtering water.<sup>13</sup> The memsahibs had serious troubles dealing with their Indian servants. From the recounting of Monica Campbell Martin, she once ordered fowl to be cooked by her cook and she describes the Incident as to how the house pets were drawn to the smell of the cooking and the cook yelled to keep the meat away from the dogs.<sup>14</sup> So the memsahibs had to keep a watch on the cook and around the Kitchen. Not only did their servants steal but the memsahibs were afraid of the ways of their servants cooking. The servants were considered to be people with least sanitation qualities and no knowledge of cleanliness as it was portrayed in the domestic manuals. There was often mismanagement in the kitchen, lack of safe drinking water and the 'proper' food. Though many memsahibs were able to cope with the Indian world, they acquired the ability to love the people of this country and culture. Some Memsahibs of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century got interested in cooking but was rare.<sup>15</sup> There are mentions of Anglo-French cuisine where mashed potato with chicken or fish was prevalent at home but the Indian cooks lacked many essential ingredients in spite of cooking it with great enthusiasm.<sup>16</sup> The memsahibs had helpers or servants who were natives of this subcontinent and there was much difficulty for them to communicate. The memsahibs who came to India had to do their domestic works with the help of servant bodies. The cooks usually arrived every morning and together they planned the day's meal. The memsahibs used to make sure that there were enough supplies that were needed for basic cooking. The native servants never properly understood their memsahibs and often did incidents which angered their mistresses. There were various types of servants namely the Butler, whose work was to bring supplies from the bazaars. The Head boy was also much similar to the butler and mainly the most importantly the cook, who had to take the duties of preparing breakfast tea, making the toast, arranging the dishes, sauces and tables, prepare dinner for any number of guests, prepare jellies and confectionary.<sup>17</sup>

The memsahibs while coming to India found out that there is a difference in the raw materials that they used to get at Britain. The weather conditions were a problem which stopped them from getting the required materials for their kitchen. The climate of India had hot and humid summers, a typical tropical climate. According to the book *Thirty-Five Years Resident*, there was a

list of consumable articles in a monthly basis in Calcutta daily bazaar-January-vegetables include green peas, cabbages, cauliflowers, spinach, carrot, turnips, beans, eggplant, orange, pineapples, sugarcane, etc. beef, and lamb, Pork, poultry, eels, rowee, etc. of first class quality. February and March- Small Hilsa, vegetables like asparagus, pumpkins and water melon fruits. April- this month was not good for meat; there was availability of fishes like carp, mango-fish. May, June, July- there was large grapes, limes, mangoes, lichees, jamrutes, etc. Meat Market was not good but inferior in quality. August and September- the vegetable market was more or less same yet quality of meat was no better. There were plenty of fruits. November and December- meat were wholesome, there was abundance of fish, along with the plentiful vegetables.<sup>18</sup> All these were often procured by the wealthy Officers servants for the Memsahibs's Indian Kitchen but the middle class memsahibs might not always get these in every day routine. They were abandoned from attending and hosting dinners and luncheons because their husbands had limited income and this in turn restricted their women's social interactions.<sup>19</sup> The memsahibs could not cope with the weather and got exhausted. There was also no proper and clean washrooms, kitchen and cooking techniques were haphazard and accepted all these the memsahibs had to live and consumed food in this land. This was probably the reason for certain diseases and epidemics like cholera, typhoid, malaria, dysentery, etc.<sup>20</sup> the memsahibs started to search for simpler recipes and food that would keep them hydrated and put away with stomach problems. They were introduced to certain new food stuffs like Tamarind, coconut water, eggplants, etc. Though Bengal had a variety of fishes yet most of the colonial memsahibs were stick to prawns and salmons, they couldn't identify all the different types of fishes and never actually took interest in consuming those. Mostly their food comprised of meat. The type of meat was especially chicken or goat because that was something easily available and other meat was not suitable to be consumed on a daily basis due to the weather conditions. There were also fruit salads which were a must to their dining tables. They were introduced with the tropical variety of fruits especially citrus fruits like lemons and limes. They enjoyed mangoes very much. The memsahibs were not used to so much of heavy spices so they used to stick to soups and curries sometimes.

They feared to taste Indian food and ingredients here. It was seen that they often carried groceries direct from England.<sup>21</sup> The Indian weather made them tired and sweaty. The consumption of excessive meat did upset their stomachs. There was lack of 'their' kind of food. There were two kinds of meal, one was the Chota Hazri- the meal taken at dawn and Barha Hazri- it was the main breakfast meal. It is important to note here that when the British came to India they continued to consume the food that they used to eat in Britain. The memsahibs would also carry crockery, sometimes a coffee grinder to make her daily cup of mocha coffee that was locally available.<sup>22</sup> She even had a great supply of fresh meat and bread.<sup>23</sup> The memsahibs hated the Indian summers and it was almost impossible to organize parties in this so they depended on the Khansamas and Bawarchis who used to prepare meals and helped them in conducting parties. These endless parties caused illness and exhaustion, the memsahibs danced and got engrossed with drinks which made them weak to leave bed and thus they had no other alternative but to depend on their Indian servants. There was invention of new dishes that were further accepted by the Indians who thought that English cooking was better and it was like an energy booster for their British Superiors. There are examples of a few like Scottish egg became Nargisi Kofta, Humble meat curry became shami kebab, etc. Long before the rise of Anglo-Indian food we see

memsahibs had to suffer a lot to sustain here. So they introduced the fusion food that is both of both west and east. The result was assimilating and amalgamating ingredients and cooking techniques into the Kitchen. There were hybrid dishes that were born out of the hand of the Indian cooks who combined spices and ingredients into the dishes and gave them a mild Indian Flavour while toning down the spices and pungency of the Indian Dishes to suit the delicate palates of the foreigners.

The memsahibs not always came from high class society yet they had an imperialistic attitude and racial supremacy. The meals of the memsahib's families were 'elaborate in framework but simple in context'.<sup>24</sup> Coming to India they generally wanted to consume her familiar food like eggs, fruits, butter, milk, etc. but they liked some of the Indian spices like pepper, garam masala, etc. They were fond of coconut, tamarind and Indian curd.<sup>25</sup> Often they were mocked for their Indianised taste of food, dress and fashion, it was sometimes considered to be outdated. Foreign vegetables were used by them in their kitchen and it consisted of mostly tomato, lettuce, cauliflower, etc. Tea and coffee were very much preferred by the memsahib. It is important to appreciate that the British were responsible for introducing certain food in Bengal's culinary culture.<sup>26</sup> The memsahibs maintained their course meals of breakfast, lunch, dinner which was later adapted by the Indians also. One of their Major contributions was the introduction of Beverages to the Bengali People, example fresh fruit juices and tea.<sup>27</sup> The British influence was such that the western educated Bengalis introduced to their kitchen typical preparations of egg, sausage, bacon and bread, chops and cutlets, which are today considered as some of the essential item for the Bengalis.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand memsahibs also became eager to consume milk products like sweets, desi curd, different fried fritters, luchi, curry and their very much favored lentil soup.<sup>29</sup> During the rule of the Raj in India, preparations like meatballs, beef kedgerree, lamb with spinach and yoghurt or with coconut and cardamom, etc were popular recipes arranged by the memsahib, these were their own recipes.<sup>30</sup> According to Mohona Kanjilal, in the early years, when the British began settling in India, they had to eat rice and curry cooked by the khansamas.<sup>31</sup> Much later the British women were fond of Indian Pickles and Chutney, like lime and tomato chutney, mango pickles and the recipes were carried back to England by them. It was evident because Asian food stores sprang up in large numbers in England quite after a few times later when the Raj returned to England.<sup>32</sup> The memsahibs usually had many Indian servants at this Indian land, there were cooks, ayahs, butler, khansamas, bawarchis, the boy, etc. they used to keep many of them because they were used to it since England. Though most of the memsahib's kitchen had Indian cooks who knew very little about European cuisine, yet they learned from their memsahibs in spite of getting scolding and cuss words. Later on, or in some wealthy British officers houses in India we can see cooks of mostly Bengali, Goanese, Nepali, Madrasi origin.<sup>33</sup> The memsahibs were reluctant to enter the kitchen and work from morning to night in this hot and humid weather, very few eagerly accepted new dishes over here. Jennifer Brennen, wrote that the khansamas were in charge of food and acquired a repertoire of French dishes and they could simply produce a wide range of Indian food accented by the regional tastes of their home provinces.<sup>34</sup> She further writes that "the majority of the British in India came from middle class homes with straightforward tastes in food."<sup>35</sup>

Thus it is observed that the kitchen of the memsahib became a melting pot of both east and west culinary culture's fusion. The kitchen became a laboratory to invent new recipes based on east and west cuisine. Definitely there was an understanding between

memsahib and her cook. A cross cultural confluence emerged and memsahib accepted it with curiosity and different mixed dishes emerged.<sup>36</sup> Curry was such a dish which gained a new dimension. There were variation of spices in these curry and subtraction and addition of vegetables or meat. In India some of the memsahibs cultivated the habit of kitchen garden with the help of their Mali( gardener), owing to the lack of proper refrigeration and preservation system, garden fresh vegetables were often used in cooking. Moreover, local supplies from the bazaars included mostly potatoes and marrows. From certain memoirs of memsahib, it is seen that, memsahibs liked to consume a variety of squashes, lady's finger, eggplant, lemons, carrot, radish and different kinds of leafy green vegetables and beans. They loved the Indian Mangoes, karamcha (Carandas plum), liches, etc.<sup>37</sup> Apart from all these positive and negative experiences, in spite of the troubles and hardships, chaos and tantrums, miscommunication and mismanagement, the relationship between the memsahib and their servants and also the food in India has left us amazed and from the memoirs and books of the memsahibs we have not only come to know about the scenario and social life of the Raj but aside of this we also understood the psychological problems which they faced. The situations made them suffer from traumas and depressions, left them lonely and unhappy. They missed their land, their homes; they longed to go back there. Those who accepted the land did it out of compromise or adjusted themselves accordingly. The British officers and soldiers would be busy with their work and rule but in the midst of all this the memsahibs were lonely souls that lived in this land called India.<sup>38</sup>

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